

# Issues of Merit

A Publication of the Office of Policy and Evaluation, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

October 1998

## Director's Perspective

### GPA and Job Success: Where's the Link?

Throughout our formal education, most of us probably absorbed a fundamental fact of academic life: good students get good grades and poor students don't. This being the case, it's understandable that an employer might conclude that good students will also be good employees. The only problem, as it turns out, is that the ability of students to earn a high grade point average (GPA) does not guarantee that they'll also be successful in a particular occupation. At least, it arguably doesn't provide enough of a guarantee to justify denying employment consideration to individuals who don't achieve high GPAs. Nonetheless, since 1981 a number of federal agencies have done just that in filling entry-level jobs in a large number of professional and administrative occupations.

A little background on this issue may be helpful. The use of college GPA as an initial "in or out" screen of federal job applicants is actually an historical anomaly. For about 30 years prior to 1979, the federal government used a nationwide, written competitive examination to rate, rank, and hire entry-level applicants for a wide range of occupations. In 1979, a group of minority applicants who failed to achieve passing scores on the exam (the Professional and Administrative Careers Exam or PACE) filed a civil action claiming that differences in the pass rates among whites, blacks, and Hispanics—and the small percentage of minorities hired—were the result of test bias. The civil action, originally known as *Luevano v. Campbell*, never came to trial. Instead, a consent decree was negotiated by the plaintiffs and the Department of Justice in 1981.

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### OPE Focus on the Facts

#### *Belief:*

In the wake of federal downsizing with its emphasis on eliminating administrative and support types of positions, the government now hires very few new clerical employees.

#### **Fact:**

In FY97, 4,554 new Data Transcribers were hired, making it the occupation with the largest number of full-time permanent new hires that year. The third largest was Miscellaneous Clerk/Assistant with 2,096 hires; Secretary, with 1,531 was sixth.

Source: MSPB calculations based on data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File

### Supervisors' Time and HRM Tasks

We've all heard that because of the downsizing of personnel office staffs, federal supervisors are being asked to assume more human resources responsibilities. But how much time do they already spend on these tasks, and what kind of HRM work are they doing? To answer these questions we surveyed over 2,600 supervisors about their job experiences. These supervisors estimated that they had spent an average of 32 percent of their time on HRM tasks during the preceding year. And the survey participants apparently think that this percentage of time is about right, because when asked how much of their time they think they *should* be spending on HRM tasks, the response, on average, was 31 percent.

But many different types of tasks are subsumed under the heading "HRM tasks." To more precisely determine how supervisors were actually spending that third of their time that they devote to HRM, we gave them a list of ten tasks, and asked them to estimate the percentage of time

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As a result of the decree, the government agreed to abolish the PACE with the intent that it would be replaced with one or more alternative written examinations that would be free of test bias. The stated purpose of the decree is to "eliminate adverse impact against blacks and against Hispanics...and to establish alternative examining procedures which are consistent with title VII..." During the period the consent decree is in effect, it also allows the use of a noncompetitive "Outstanding Scholar" appointment authority for students with GPAs of 3.5 or better to help eliminate adverse impact. The consent decree is clear, however, that this and some other special programs would only be in effect during the life of the consent decree and were not intended to be permanent replacements for the PACE.

It is unlikely that the parties to the decree anticipated that it would still be in effect more than 17 years later. From that time to this, however, job applicants who graduate from college with an undergraduate grade point average of at least 3.5 (on a 4.0 scale) can be hired without further competition into a large number of entry-level professional and administration occupations in the government. While on the surface this may seem reasonable, consider the points that follow.

Under the consent decree:

- ✓ No consideration need be given to field of academic study in screening applicants based on GPA. Therefore, for an entry-level position as a budget analyst, a college graduate with a degree in business or accounting and a 3.4 GPA is not eligible for consideration, but a physical education or foreign language major with a 3.5 GPA is eligible.
- ✓ No consideration is given to the academic stature of the

college or university. A 3.4 GPA at a highly competitive institution isn't good enough to provide eligibility for employment consideration, while a 3.5 GPA at a marginal institution with lax grading standards is.

- ✓ No consideration is given to recency of degree in using GPA as a screen. A 3.5 GPA earned 20 years ago will allow an applicant to be considered for employment but a new college graduate with a GPA of 3.4 is out of the running.
- ✓ There is no requirement to provide veterans preference in using GPA to screen applicants. A veteran with a GPA of 3.4 or lower would not be considered but nonveterans with GPAs of 3.5 or higher would.
- ✓ Use of college GPA to screen applicants adds to many jobs a qualifications requirement over and above what OPM's qualifications

standards actually call for. Published qualifications standards for most entry-level administrative positions allow candidates to demonstrate that they have experience or a combination of education and experience that qualifies them for the job. Use of GPA as a minimum screen eliminates these job seekers from consideration.

The bottom line is that the college recruiting and selection programs being used by some federal agencies assume a substantial relationship—thus far unproven—between college GPA and job success. However, unless agencies can demonstrate that relationship, there is little justification for using the GPA as an "in or out" selection tool.

*John M. Palguta*  
Director, Policy and Evaluation

## Supervisors' Time *(continued from page 1)*

spent on each one—0%; less than 10%; 10-30%; or more than 30%. The tasks in the list covered both

traditional HRM functions such as staffing and classification and tasks more traditionally thought of as

### What percentage of the time that supervisors spent on HRM work did they spend on each of the indicated tasks?

Task	More than 30%	10-30%	0% to less than 10%
Assigning and reviewing work	34.7	44.4	20.8
Mentoring/coaching	14.9	44.9	40.1
Dealing with training and employee development issues	7.1	31.1	61.7
Restructuring and reorganization tasks unrelated to downsizing	6.4	21.5	72.2
Dealing with poor performance	5.5	20.9	73.7
Downsizing activities	5.2	14.8	79.9
Filling jobs	4.3	19.4	76.3
Getting jobs properly classified	3.4	11.7	85.0
Administering union contract provisions	1.7	6.9	91.4
Other HRM tasks(e.g., resolving conflicts among subordinates, appraising performance, scheduling leave, recommending awards)	12.2	48.0	39.7

Note: because of rounding, rows may not total 100 percent.

Source: 1997 MSPB Survey of Managers and Supervisors

“managerial” responsibilities, such as assigning work. The table on page 2 summarizes supervisors’ responses to our survey question.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of the supervisors participating in the survey indicated that most of the time they do spend on HRM is devoted to tasks more typically associated with people management than with activities formerly performed by the personnel office. Thus, supervisors are more likely to spend time assigning and reviewing work and mentoring/coaching than on tasks such as getting jobs properly classified and correctly paid or filling job vacancies. This finding makes sense in light of the fact that some HRM tasks arise only intermittently (most supervisors don’t have job vacancies to fill every day), while HRM tasks associated with managing subordinates are attended to on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, our survey findings suggest that supervisors might want to take a look at how much attention they’re giving their non day-to-day HRM tasks. For example, how supervisors decide to structure their work units (i.e., the types and grades of jobs they decide they need), how to find candidates for those jobs, and what kind of training and development should be provided for employees occupying those jobs play an important role in the overall effectiveness of work units. Assigning the work and coaching employees will only go so far towards mission accomplishment if the supervisors don’t ensure that other important HR activities are given sufficient attention.

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## MSPB To Evaluate ADR Program

In keeping with its long-standing belief in the efficacy of alternative dispute resolution, the Board

recently announced that it is available to work with one or more federal agencies to document the impact of an ADR training program aimed at turning selected employees into a new kind of federal employment professional — the certified appeals resolution advisor.

The program, which will be administered by the Public Administration Forum and the Cornell University Institute on Conflict Resolution, provides for coordinated, in-depth training of selected employees in a range of competencies including dispute resolution, negotiation, and psychology, as well as MSPB case law and organizational development law. The goal is

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*The goal is to create a cadre of specialists who are equipped to perform the multiple roles needed to avert and resolve workplace conflicts.*

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to create a cadre of trained specialists who are equipped to perform the multiple roles needed to avert or resolve workplace conflicts.

The Board’s participation in the project will include a joint MSPB/agency assessment effort that will use attitudinal and objective measures to determine whether the advisors program is succeeding both in avoiding and in more rapidly resolving workplace disputes that might otherwise be appealed to MSPB.

Agencies interested in the training program should contact the Public Administration Forum, (703) 684-4799. Readers interested in participating in the Board’s assessment study may contact the Office of Policy and Evaluation by phone at (202) 653-8900, or email at [pe.contact@mspb.gov](mailto:pe.contact@mspb.gov).

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## Study Examines Programs for Displaced Feds

In 1996, in response to the challenge of reducing the federal workforce by 300,000 employees, OPM introduced the Career Transition Program (CTAP) and its companion program, the Interagency Career Transition Program (ICTAP), to help federal employees who faced the loss of their jobs.

MSPB’s Office of Policy and Evaluation is studying the effectiveness of CTAP and ICTAP, in part by surveying over 1,800 federal workers who were placed in federal jobs through the programs between October 1996 and December 1997.

Very early returns from survey participants who were placed in federal jobs suggest that many of them believe that they were not given thorough transition services by the agency that laid them off. Also, in a number of cases, the employees’ new jobs had less tenure (e.g., they were term or temporary appointments) than the jobs from which they were displaced.

One specific concern on which the study focuses is the issue of displaced employees’ access to electronic job postings. The career transition programs require surplus or displaced employees who want to be considered for other federal jobs to submit applications for the specific vacancies they’re interested in. Candidates who are well qualified are then given special selection priority. To assure that the employees know about the vacancies, federal agencies are required to post their job vacancies on OPM’s website and electronic bulletin board, which are the government’s only centralized sources for federal job announcements. Study results suggest that

many displaced employees had no way of accessing OPM's website or its bulletin board during their job searches.

We anticipate that the report on transition services for federal employees will be available in early 1999.

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## OPE Joins in Reinvention Survey

How well has the reinvention of government been working? To help answer that question MSPB's Office of Policy and Evaluation collaborated with the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) this summer to ask some 35,000 federal employees, via a governmentwide survey, a series of questions intended to get at the heart of how reinvention is affecting workers and the workplace. Joining NPR in this effort, in addition to MSPB, were survey experts from OPM and the Federal Aviation Administration. The results of the survey are expected to be published on NPR's website later this fall.

Although MSPB's 1996 Merit Principles Survey has already provided a preliminary look at the effects of NPR, this new survey focuses exclusively and in more detail on assessing reinvention and identifying how organizations are doing in key areas related to high performance such as rewards and recognition, training, empowerment, labor-management partnerships, customer service, diversity, leadership, teamwork, streamlining systems, regulatory oversight, automation, job attitudes, and handling poor performers.

The Board's earlier look at reinvention found that it was not yet a high priority in many organizations. However, those agencies that *had* made NPR objectives a high priority tended to outperform agencies that had not on a number

of measures, such as employee job satisfaction and perceptions about improvements in work unit productivity. The NPR survey should provide a more comprehensive view of these issues and will permit a close look at the performance of organizations designated as "high impact agencies." These are organizations such as the Social Security Administration and the Food and Drug Administration, which have the most interaction with the public.

The survey was designed to be short and easy to complete—just 33 questions, most of which have been used in previous MSPB, OPM, and private sector surveys. Repeating survey items in this manner is a technique that will permit some important comparisons over time. The survey has received the strong support of the President's Management Council and has been briefed to a wide variety of stakeholders, including the National Partnership Council, the Inter-Agency Advisory Group, and the Coalition for Effective Change. Participating agencies will be strongly encouraged to use the results in their strategic plans and to develop action plans to address areas that need improvement.

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## HR Connections

In our last issue we made these suggestions to help you use the Internet to obtain information on HR issues: become familiar with at least one Internet search engine, acquire the free Adobe Acrobat reader program, and subscribe to one or more HR-oriented electronic newsletters. In this column we highlight some of the government websites that are worth including among your Internet browser's bookmarks or favorite sites. Often these sites provide handy access to what's new and

quickly guide you to the latest information.

While some of these websites are agency-specific, others might more appropriately be called megasites or gateways, since they not only contain specific HR management information, but also provide a speedy connection to a variety of other related websites.


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*You should always assess the source of any information you obtain from Internet websites. Even websites you trust can link to other sites that may not have the same level of accuracy or currency of information as the original site.*

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The following list is not meant in any way to be exhaustive, but should provide a good starting point for discovery via the Internet of what's happening in the federal HR community. Remember, though, that you should always question and carefully assess the source of any information you obtain from Internet websites. Even websites you trust can link to other sites that may not have the same level of accuracy or currency of information as the original site.

The sites listed here tend to load quickly, present information in an appealing way, and are relatively easy to browse. For some of the materials available at the sites, the Adobe Acrobat reader, mentioned above, is a must. In addition to MSPB's own website at <http://www.mspb.gov> (which includes publications you can download and searchable access to recent MSPB decisions) the following websites are good candidates for your bookmark list. (We've omitted the standard <http://> prefix.)

 [www.opm.gov](http://www.opm.gov) This easy-to-use OPM website contains  
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virtually all of the latest regulations, workforce statistics, job vacancy listings, resources, handbooks, guidance, and information related to HR management in the federal civil service.

↔ [www.npr.gov](http://www.npr.gov) This recently revised website of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) includes tools, resources, and reports about reinvention, customer service, benchmarking, managing for results, performance measurement, procurement, partnerships, and much more. The home page provides links to many other websites and reinvention tools.

↔ [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov) The website of the General Accounting Office, this provides ready access to GAO reports and testimony. Most of GAO's recent publications can be quickly located using one or more search strategies and then viewed, read, downloaded, or printed in PDF format.

↔ [thomas.loc.gov](http://thomas.loc.gov) This website provides comprehensive, up-to-date information on Congressional activities, the status of legislation, historical documents, House and Senate directories, and links to Congressional member webpages.

↔ [www.fedstat.gov](http://www.fedstat.gov) This website lets you quickly obtain information from over 70 agencies responsible for national statistical reports.

↔ [www.info.gov](http://www.info.gov) Courtesy of the General Services Administration, this site is a one-stop gateway to resources in the federal government, including much information relevant to federal employment.

↔ [www.flra.gov](http://www.flra.gov) The website of the Federal Labor Relations Authority, this provides background information about the Authority and access to summaries and decisions pertaining to the labor-management relations program for 1.9 million federal employees.

Of course, there are many other useful and informative government

websites, most of which can be found through the sites listed here. In a future *Issues of Merit*, we'll look at some of the many excellent private sector websites that are relevant to human resources management.

## Public Service Values

Prompted by the increasing public focus on employee values and ethics, we recently reexamined MSPB survey data to see how federal employees characterize their own public service values. The Board's 1996 merit principles survey included several items that focused on values and motivation of career civil servants, and the survey results provide some data that suggest a healthy public service orientation among federal workers.

For example, a large majority—some 86 percent of respondents—agreed that meaningful public service is important to them. The

responses of most of the survey participants seemed to convey a sense that federal workers view themselves as contributors to a common good. Some 68 percent of those responding agreed that daily events remind them of how dependent we are on one another; 80 percent said they would go to bat for the rights of others, even if such an action brought ridicule upon them. And nearly half of the survey respondents indicated that making a difference in society is more important to them than personal achievements. Given these results—responses that suggest orientation towards collaboration and teamwork—it is, perhaps, not surprising that the employees who responded to these survey items were not overwhelmingly interested in personally creating public policy: some 40 percent agreed that public policy making held little appeal for them.

The table below lists the survey items and displays the percentage of survey participants who gave the indicated responses to each item.

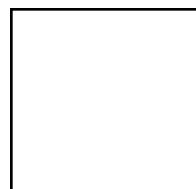
**Federal Workers and Public Service Orientation**

	Agree/ strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
Meaningful public service is very important to me.	86	11	3
The work performed by my unit provides the public a worthwhile return on their tax dollars.	82	10	8
I am not afraid to go to bat for the rights of others even if it means I will be ridiculed.	80	14	6
I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another.	69	21	10
Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements.	49	36	15
The give and take of public policy doesn't appeal to me.	40	36	25

Note: Because of rounding, rows may not total 100 percent.

Source: 1996 MSPB Merit Principles Survey

U. S. Merit Systems Protection Board  
1120 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20419



## Selected Publications from the Office of Policy and Evaluation\*

- ☐ Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management
- ☐ Civil Service Evaluation: the Evolving Role of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management
- ☐ The Changing Federal Workplace: Employee Perspectives
- ☐ Adherence to the Merit Principles in the Workplace: Federal Employees' Views
- ☐ Achieving a Representative Workforce: Addressing the Barriers to Hispanic Participation
- ☐ Fair and Equitable Treatment: A Progress Report on Minority Employment in the Federal Government
- ☐ The Rule of Three in Federal Hiring: Boon or Bane?
- ☐ Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Trends, Progress, Continuing Challenges
- ☐ Removing Poor Performers in the Federal Service: An Issue Paper
- ☐ Leadership for Change: Human Resource Development in the Federal Government
- ☐ Temporary Federal Employment: In Search of Flexibility and Fairness
- ☐ Whistleblowing in the Federal Government: An Update
- ☐ A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling in the Federal Government

## Selected Current Projects

- ☐ Dealing with employee performance problems
- ☐ Entry level hiring
- ☐ Merit promotion

*For a copy of any Office of Policy and Evaluation publication, contact:*

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1120 Vermont Avenue, NW              V/TDD: (202) 653-8896  
Washington, DC 20419                  Fax: (202) 653-7211

\* Most of these reports are available for downloading from the MSPB home page: <http://www.mspb.gov>

"Issues of Merit" provides findings and recommendations drawn from MSPB research on topics and issues relevant to the effective operation of the federal merit systems and the significant actions of the Office of Personnel Management.